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A SCULPTOR'S REMINISCENCES OF EMERSON

By DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH

Glendale, July 3, 1915

Dear Mr. Editor:

YOUR request that I shall give you some of my impressions of Emerson carries me back to the days of my youth, in the quiet little New England town that ever since the April morning when its "embattled farmers" confronted the British at the old North Bridge, has been famous for the performances of her sons. None of them has so impressed his character and personality upon it or upon the world as did this divinely inspired teacher. Of his effect upon the world at large I have no need to speak, but in Concord he stood for what amounted to a sort of community conscience, his high ideals of life creating a standard that made people ashamed to act, or even to think, ignobly.

Concord in his time was indeed a village of "plain living and high thinking." There was little luxury there and no poverty. A stranger who had money was required to explain himself, and, so far from gaining socially, was regarded with suspicion. The lives of the people were as quiet as the river that loitered rather than flowed through the broad meadows and past the old-fashioned gardens back of the Revolutionary houses on elm-arched Main Street.

At no time has Concord had such a coterie of distinguished men as in Emerson's day and few towns can boast so long a list—among them Hawthorne and Thoreau and Channing and Alcott and Curtis. In the procession of pilgrims to the shrine of Emerson were counted all the men of letters of his generation.

My own acquaintance with Mr. Emerson began when my father took up his abode in Concord in 1867. Already he was an elderly man. The most vivid impression of him that I have brought away from that time was of a tall figure, walking the village streets enveloped in a long black cloak or shawl, and looking as I imagined Dante must have looked as he walked the streets of Florence.

Young as I was, I was impressed, as every one was, with his dignified, serene presence. We have all had the common experience of disappointment in meeting some celebrity whose works we have long known and esteemed, because the man himself did not realize our ideal of him, but Emerson seemed as great as he really was—this very tall, spare, loosely hung figure with small head and rather large hands and feet, with clothes worn for use and without thought of them. It was none of these things that made all who approached him aware that they were in the presence of a demigod. Perhaps it was the soul that shone out upon you from his face; or the deep, full, beautiful voice with its matchless enunciation and perfect diction; or the clear, piercing eyes; or the courtesy towards man or child, high or lowly, which was unailing; or a combination of all these and much besides that went to make up the indefinable atmosphere that invested this man, whose presence was a benediction.

I have spoken of the influence of Emerson's personality upon the community. It was one of the

evidences of his symmetrically rounded nature that the respect and admiration in which he was held by the outside world were shared by his townsmen, who were, one and all, as proud of him as if he had been their own kin. He was a good citizen and neighbor, exemplary in the common, every-day relations of life, reasonable and just, so that the idle gossip of the village passed him by—a tribute that those may not appreciate who have not lived in a small town.

The unaffected simplicity as well as the kindness of the man may be illustrated by his attitude toward me, a youth of twenty. When spending an evening at his house soon after his return from abroad, he seated me comfortably in a chair before a big magnifying glass and, himself standing, placed in position for me to see a collection of photographs of pictures and statues and places in which he knew I would be interested. Had I been of his own age and importance he could not have treated me with more deference or taken more pains for my entertainment and enlightenment.

A few years later a friend asked me to secure Mr. Emerson's autograph for her collection. As he turned the pages of her autograph-book, he said: "I ought to write something besides my name" and going to his note-book he selected the following lines:

"This fleeting moment is an edifice that the Omnipotent cannot rebuild."

The preciousness of the present moment is reiterated in many forms in Emerson's writings—as in that masterly crystallization of the idea, his "Days."

It was in the spring of 1879 that Mr. Emerson granted my request that he would sit to me for a bust. My improvised studio was, for his convenience, a room on the lower floor of his house, and here, almost daily for a month, patiently and uncomplainingly, this good man sat to me, more from the wish to do me a favor than from any great interest in the work itself.

A newspaper critic has spoken of this bust as "French's topographical survey of Emerson's face" and this it certainly was, if nothing more; for at that time I used a system of triangulation with almost countless measurements that I had learned in the studios of Hiram Powers and Thomas Ball in Florence. To be sure I tried, as they did, to add to my cold facts and attempted to catch somewhat of the glorified expression—the "lighting up" that people noted in Emerson's face, but probably the head is chiefly valuable for being as close a record of his features as my conscientious endeavors could attain.

The comments of my distinguished sitter during the progress of the work, as was to be expected, were interesting or amusing. Thus during the first session when I expressed regret at putting him to so much trouble he responded: "This is as easy as sleeping." Later, when he looked at the result of several days' work he said: "The trouble is that the more it resembles me the worse it looks." Of

another bust that had been made of him it is recalled that he said: "It looks as harmless as a parsnip." Could any simile be more apt to describe a characterless portrait?

He talked to me of poetry and spoke of having received a poem from a man in Washington which he considered unusual and which he had sent with his commendation to the Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who thought it not good enough to publish. Mr. Emerson remarked: "Old age can hardly have deprived me of my power to judge poetry."

He referred affectionately to Thoreau, who was among his closest friends in Concord and said he was his own worst enemy; that he regarded all men with contempt—except the farmer and the workingman, whom he pitied.

As illustrating his want of appreciation of music he recounted his first experience in singing. He attended a singing-school and the teacher told him to "chord." He said he didn't know what that meant, but supposed it was to produce a sound, which he did, whereupon the teacher suggested that he might go and need not return.

Of special interest was his account of his only interview with Ruskin. He was at Oxford and heard Ruskin lecture and then called upon him at his rooms. Ruskin became excited and talked so about humanity in general that Mr. Emerson could not bear it and told him he would have to go, and he and his daughter Ellen departed. He said that "Ruskin seemed to think that all mankind was going to the devil."

He talked of the great men of the century and said that he considered Webster above all other Americans or English of the time.

He told me of the coming of Hawthorne to dwell in the old Manse in Concord, and of his own failure to gain intimacy with the newcomer through the medium of the conventional exchange of calls. He said he felt that something must be done to break down the barrier which Hawthorne's natural shyness probably augmented, and he went to him and proposed that they should take a walk together—twenty miles—over to the little town of Harvard, spend the night at the Shaker Village and walk back to Concord the next day. Hawthorne accepted the invitation and the program was carried out. "Now" said Mr. Emerson "while two men might travel forty miles together in the steam-cars, or even ride in a chaise as far as that, without becoming acquainted, it is hardly possible for two men to *walk* forty miles in each other's company without feeling that they know each other pretty well. Mr. Hawthorne and I had no further difficulty."

My statue of Emerson, which is in marble and

stands in the Concord Free Public Library, was made two years ago from such materials in the way of photographs and daguerrotypes as could be collected, together with my study of his head as a foundation. It seemed proper to represent him in his prime, and again I endeavored to fix the elusive, illuminated expression of which I have spoken; also, to perpetuate the peculiar sidewise thrust of the head on the neck that was characteristic of him, conveying an impression of mental searching. The gown which was used as drapery was one that he wore in his study in the winter and took the name by which it was known in the household, "the Gaberlunzie," from the character of Eddie Ochiltree in Scott's "Antiquary." It is still in existence and in the possession of his daughter. It is a heavy, wadded and quilted, dark blue garment, and one can easily believe that its voluminous folds were very grateful to the poet and essayist of a winter's morning in his study in the northwest corner of the house.

No statue or picture, however true it might be to a passing phase, could be an adequate representation of his face, the expression of which changed with his thoughts and mirrored them. Henry James has spoken of "the overmodeled American face." Whether he intended this as a tribute to the intelligence of the Americans or not, it seems to be true that the higher the development of intellect in a race, the more complicated become the forms of the face, and, in less marked degree, those of the body. Emerson's face bore out this theory and, in spite of the boldness of the general plan, had an infinity of detail, the delicacy of which evinced the refinement of the soul that evolved it.

The Concord of Emerson is a thing of the past. Its glory faded out with his life and, though it continued to be and still is a charming example of the New England town, peopled by charming and cultivated folk, the old-time aroma is lost and the spell is broken!

A bright woman to whom some one spoke of Concord as being so remarkable as a literary center replied—"Yes, but it is somewhat now like the extinct stars that continue to shed their light on the earth long after they have ceased to exist." But though the great figures in literature that we associate with the town are gone, we may still find their names on the stones under the great pines in the cemetery; and if we walk there in the summer twilight and open our minds to impressions, the "daemon" of Emerson and the other gifted souls may gather about us and grant us visions, be they ever so dim and vague, of the golden age of classic Concord.

Daniel Chester French

